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**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
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June 2, 2020

David Gerstenfeld  
Interim Director  
Oregon Employment Department  
875 Union St. NE  
Salem, OR 97311

Dear Mr. Gerstenfeld,

Today, hundreds of thousands of Oregonians are worried about how to afford their rent or mortgage payment, pay utility bills, and put food on the table without a paycheck. Working families that were already struggling to make ends meet before the coronavirus pandemic are now facing a financial cliff. With the unprecedented unemployment rates in the last few months, I understand that the Oregon Employment Department (OED) is under tremendous pressure. But the Department has so far failed to meet the needs of Oregonians who rely on unemployment insurance benefits. As you transition into your new role as Interim Director of OED, I am committed to working with you to provide more assistance and transparency to those waiting for vital unemployment benefits.

In the last few weeks, hundreds of people have turned to my office for answers and for help navigating unemployment benefits. Oregonians are contacting my office in desperation. They have spent hours on hold or have been trying for days to get through to OED to process a claim or check the status of a claim. Some have waited months and have not heard back from OED. People are relying on unemployment benefits to help them through these challenging times, and it should not take months to get the assistance they need.

According to the Federal Reserve, the majority of Americans cannot cover a \$400 emergency expense. Last week, we learned that, in addition to OED's backlog of 38,000 claims, as many as 200,000 Oregonians have yet to receive their benefits. This is unacceptable. You must act quickly to do everything in your power to address this backlog immediately, and to clearly and transparently communicate your progress to the public.

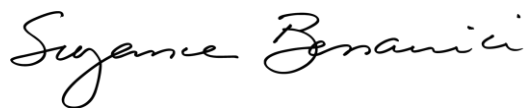
Congress acted expeditiously to help unemployed workers in anticipation of increased claims during the economic shutdown that was put in place to limit the spread of COVID-19. We passed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which secured two grant payments of more than \$12 million total for OED to increase staffing, technology, and systems to make the unemployment system easier for workers to navigate. Congress also passed the CARES Act to

expand access to unemployment benefits to more people, provide an additional \$600 per week in benefits, and allocate funding for the state to waive its waiting week period for benefits. It was alarming to see a statement from OED last week suggesting that the waiting week might not be waived before the end of this calendar year, when that funding expires. Oregonians should not and cannot be punished for the state's failure to upgrade technology. The Department of Labor has made two resources available to state employment departments that are encountering technological issues in responding to the unprecedented spike in unemployment claims, U.S. Digital Services and resources from Code for America. I urge you to take advantage of all available resources to address the COBOL system failures and put in place a way to waive the waiting week for benefits within the next month.

I am also deeply concerned about the lack of transparency and communication about OED's processes. OED should consider organizing public webinars within the next week to explain eligibility for traditional unemployment insurance, the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program, and the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) extended benefits. This is an easy step that should have been taken at the beginning of the economic crisis. It is imperative for OED to provide more information to the public about what and when they can expect to hear from OED throughout the claim process and what steps someone should take if they have not heard back from OED within a timely manner. OED should also provide more public information about the average timeline for the Department to process a claim. I appreciate that OED is now using pre-recorded phone messages and emails to confirm that the Department received an individual's PUA claim, but communication needs to be strengthened. People deserve more transparency from a state agency distributing lifeline benefits during this economic crisis.

As we begin the fourth month of this health and economic crisis, I stand ready to work with you to make sure that Oregonians receive benefits they need to take care of themselves and their families with dignity. I am aware that OED recently launched "Project Focus 100," but now is the time to put that commitment into action to help the hundreds of thousands of people waiting on their benefits. I encourage you to contact me directly if OED needs additional federal resources to meet the scale of this crisis.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Suzanne Bonamici".

Suzanne Bonamici  
Member of Congress

Cc: Governor Kate Brown